

Love is Strange

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Summary:

When his friends start to fall in love, Mike starts to wonder what it's like and goes on a little quest to find out. It doesn't give him the answer he wanted but maybe the one he needed

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His friends are falling love and Mike has never felt this left out since he's met the Losers. It starts with Ben and Bev and it doesn't bother him as much, because as long as he's known Ben, he's had a crush on Bev and Mike thinks it's great that she finally feels the same way. They aren't obvious about it either. They just do more stuff alone, sometimes they hold hands when they all hang out together but that's it.

Because Ben's been in love for so long, Mike thinks he must know what it's all about. He's 15 and he goes to the same school as his friends now, so he knows some things, but he still doesn't feel like he gets it. The two boys are sitting in the library together, working on a history project, when Mike decides that it's safe to ask Ben.

"What do you like about Bev?"

Ben doesn't look up from his work, when he says: "Everything." Mike doesn't think that's true. As much as he loves Beverly, she has some pretty annoying habits, but maybe that's just because he's not in love with her. Maybe.

When Ben finally does look at him, Mike still waits for an answer. A real one, and Ben seems to understand without being asked again. "Well, she's smart and she doesn't take any crap, I always admired that in her. Even when everyone was spreading those dumb rumors about her, she still walked with her head held high. She's caring, like, she just accepts us the way that we are. I mean, she puts up with Richie better than anyone else and sometimes I don't know how she does it."

Well, yes, Bev is cool. Mike thinks those things about her too, but he doesn't think he's in love with her.

"She's beautiful too. I think I knew I loved her, when she smiled at me the first time, when she signed my yearbook even though we didn't know each other and she didn't have to."

Maybe it's that then. Mike thinks she's beautiful too, but he kind of

thinks all his friends are beautiful, all in their own way. Beverly has her fiery hair that makes her stand out in a crowd and that warm smile, when she's making sure everything is okay. Ben has those kind, understanding eyes, Mike probably always felt safest to open up to Ben. Richie is loud, not just his mouth, but his ridiculous Hawaiian shirts and his messy hair, and Mike loves that about him, that you can just look at him and feel a little lighter. He also likes that you can tell Richie is about to say something really dumb a second before he does, because the corners of his mouth always twitch in anticipation. Stan is always so put together, something Mike could never achieve even if he tried, but most of all Stan is observant and Mike usually looks to him for confirmation, like 'did that really just happen' and Stan will grin and acknowledge it. Eddie's laugh is infectious, as soon as Eddie cracks up at one of Richie's dumb jokes or Stan's quips or Bev's sarcastic comment, Mike can't help himself and joins in. Bill is sure of himself, like he knows exactly who he is and where he's going and it's hard not to admire a person like that. All his friends are beautiful, but Mike thinks he's missed the point of what Ben's been saying. Again.

The next time he asks, it's Bev. She's been with Ben for a while now, surely she must know what being in love is like. They're sitting in the park, watching as their friends monkey around on the playground.

"What's it like?", he asks, "Being with Ben?"

She throws him a curious look. "It's not much different than before to be honest. Now it's just... more, I guess." He doesn't know what she means with more. He already feels like he cares a lot about his friends, how could there possibly be a version of that that's more?

"Why do you ask? Is there someone you like?", she asks, handing him her cigarette.

Mike takes a long drag, holds the smoke in his lungs until it starts to burn and exhales slowly. "Just interested. How do you mean, more?"

Bev shrugs, she pulls one leg onto the bench and faces him. "Like...

he takes up more space now. You know, he somehow ends up in the front of my mind much more than he used to. He makes me happy.”

Obviously he does, but how is that different than the happy she feels, when she’s with the rest of the Losers? The question seems stupid and so Mike just nods as if he totally understands what she is talking about.

“It’s different when you’re friends with them first. I guess, it’s not as awkward as it would be otherwise”, she says and then she giggles, her freckled cheeks turning slightly pink. “I’ve only ever been with Ben, I wouldn’t really know.”

Mike smiles back at her. He can see the love they share, he just doesn’t understand it and if anything he’s more confused after talking to her.

Bill has all the answers, at least that’s what it feels like most of the time, so he’s the next person Mike asks. Bill’s helping Mike with his chores on the farm, currently they’re stacking bales of straw in the barn, but they’ve been at it for over an hour and Mike’s arms are getting sore, so he’s glad when Bill takes a seat on the bales and lets his feet dangle over the edge. Mike sits next to him, he can practically hear Eddie’s voice in his head, scolding them for taking such a risk. They’re pretty high up, there’s not much room left between them and the ceiling and the straw could easily topple over, but Mike has never worried about that.

“Thanks for helping me.”

Bill smiles and runs a hand through his sweaty hair. “Of c-course.”

It takes Mike a while to ask the questions that’s been sitting on the tip of his tongue. He feels like an idiot, pestering his friends like this, but he also can’t stand to not know. Part of him is afraid they’ll laugh and think he’s stupid, but then he looks at Bill and knows he would never.

“Have you ever been in love?”

Bill’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise, but that’s all. “Yeah”, he says and picks at the straw beneath them, frees a stalk and twirls it between his fingers.

“What’s that like?”

“Terrifying.”

After having talked to Ben and Bev, Mike thinks Bill might have it wrong. If it makes them so happy, how can it be terrifying? Especially to Bill who’s pretty much fearless.

“You’re always s-s-second guessing yourself”, Bill elaborates without being prompted. “Was that a sign they l-l-l-like me t-too, or are they just being friendly? Did I over-d-d-do it? Do they think I’m ann-n-n-noying? It’s like... them figuring out you like them is the worst thing th-that could happen, b-b-b-but the best thing at the s-s-s-same time, because then it w-w-would f-finally be over.”

Mike briefly wonders what person could make Bill feel that way, but he doesn’t want to ask. If Bill wanted him to know, he would’ve told him. Maybe Bev didn’t feel this way, because she already knew Ben liked her, but then Ben didn’t feel like this either.

Maybe Ben is more confident when it comes to matters of the heart than Bill is. It’s an interesting thought.

For some reason, the next person he asks is Richie. He doesn’t know why, because if he’d thought this through, Richie would’ve been at the very bottom of the list. But they are walking home from school together, later than the rest, because Richie had detention and Mike had football practice and it just feels like the perfect moment to ask.

“What’s love like?”, he wonders aloud and braces himself for a classic Richie reaction or at least a laugh, but Richie does neither.

He fumbles in the pockets of his denim jacket for a while until he

pulls out a pack of cigarettes, places one between his lips and lights up. "Like the world's best drug, gets you addicted in no time."

Richie holds the cigarette out to him, but Mike declines. He doesn't like to smoke after working out, there's just something off about the taste right after. Briefly he wonders what Richie knows about drugs and if that is something he should worry about, but then Richie continues to talk and Mike decides he can think about that later.

"You know, you just have to be around the person all the time and you do stupid shit to get their attention. Any kind of attention really. And if you can't be with them it's the worst, because you still just keep thinking about them and when you can see them again."

"That sounds exhausting", Mike says, because it does. He tries to relate, but can't think of a single person that he wants to be around constantly. If his mind was occupied with one person the whole time, he wonders how long it would take for his thoughts to repeat themselves. Don't you get bored with that?

"How do you know that? Have you been in love?" If Richie has, he's certainly not told them about it. The way Richie describes it, Mike thinks they'd all know if he was in love. He'd pester that poor person until they hated him. Richie doesn't answer, he just smiles knowingly at Mike and continues to smoke.

Tomorrow they have a math test and Mike is at Stan's to study. They usually study alone for big things, because they never get anything done with the others around. It's not just Richie that is distracting. Bev can't concentrate for long unless she's really interested in something and math is not one of those things. Bill on his own would not be a problem, but the combination of Stan and Bill usually ends in hushed conversations about something completely different. Eddie is only really bad when Richie is around to annoy him, but Eddie likes to talk; he learns better if he can talk it through and it's distracting. Ben likes to study, but he usually finds something else he's more interested in and studies that instead. So it's just Mike and Stan because that's how they work best.

“Have you ever been in love?”, Mike asks while they compare results.

Stan brushes a stray curl out of his face and studies Mike for a while. Mike often wonders how Stan’s mind works, he’s sure there’s much more going on in there than Stan lets on and Mike is curious. Not curious enough to ask though, he doesn’t want to overstep invisible boundaries.

Then Stan smiles. “Yes.”

“What’s it like?”

“It’s... For me it’s like...” He fumbles with his words at first, but then seems to find something that sounds good to him. “Look it’s like this. When I’m around them it’s like everything is suddenly calm and at peace, whereas the world usually just spins too fast for my liking. It’s easy to be me around them and even if they don’t like me the same way, I want the best for them. It makes me happy to see them happy. Does that make sense?”

And he looks at Mike so earnestly, as if he really needs this to make sense to someone else, so Mike nods even though it doesn’t really. He still doesn’t know how that is different from the way he feels about all of them. So far he likes Stan’s explanation the best, but it’s also the one closest to what he already feels for his friends and Mike is confused if he misses something or maybe he’s just in love with all of his friends and has never realized it.

“But it’s different for everyone”, Stan says and turns back to the math problems. “What I feel is not what you feel.”

Well, it would be very helpful if love could be a little less abstract right about now, because Mike just wants to understand why it’s such a big deal.

He lets Eddie see his frustration, when they’re at their very first high school party and both of them just needed to be outside and away from the crowd for a while.

"I just don't get it", Mike says. "I don't get what's so great about being in love."

Eddie laughs a little, but it's not malicious. He taps his fingers against his knee while he thinks of what to say, not that Mike needs him to explain. He doubts Eddie can do what all the other losers couldn't, but he listens anyway.

"I don't think it's something you have to get. It's not like it lets you choose anyway. You can fall in love with the biggest idiot on the planet and then you'll just have to deal with it." He smiles when he says this and a suspicion forms in Mike's head. The biggest idiot Eddie knows – they all know – is Richie. He thinks about what Richie said about how love is like a drug and you need the attention and he thinks that maybe Richie was thinking of Eddie.

"I know", he says, deciding not to bring any of that up. It's not his place to tell and he doubts Eddie or Richie would confess to it if it was true. "It's just... why does everyone want it?"

"Because... I guess it makes you feel good. It's kind of overwhelming to feel so strongly for someone else, but it's also... I don't know, it surprised me that I could." He smiles shyly at Mike and then shakes his head. "But I don't always get it either. It makes you vulnerable and it's scary that a person has so much power over you."

At this point, Mike starts to think that he might never get it. He's asked all of his friends and he still doesn't understand. Is there something wrong with him? By now he should at least have had a crush, shouldn't he? He doubts his crush on Emily Hendricks counts, because he just decided to have one on her when he realized that almost everyone liked somebody and he figured Emily was pretty when she wore her glasses and she was always nice to him, when they sat next to each other in Geography. But he hadn't felt anything for her really. Not even close to what his friends have described.

He sighs. "I still don't understand. I never liked someone like that." Although he kind of thinks he likes his friends like that, but he doesn't get the insecurity Bill talked about or the vulnerability Eddie mentioned or Richie's overpowering need for attention and nobody is more important than the other like Stan or Bev said. He likes them all

the same.

Eddie leans his head against Mike's shoulder. "Maybe you will someday."

"And what if I don't?"

"Then you don't."

"But what if something is wrong with me?"

"Trust me, Mike, nothing is wrong with you. You know, there are different kinds of love, not everything has to be romantic."

That seems a bit hard to believe, when all his friends think being in love is great and when there's a love story in every movie they see at the Aladdin even the ones that don't need one, and Mike knows everyone is expected to marry and have kids, how does he do that, when he can't find a single person he likes enough for that.

The door opens, Stan takes a long look at them, then sits next to Mike. "Talking about love again?"

Mike doesn't wonder how he knows, because he's Stan and Stan always knows what's going on. Sometimes it's a bit unsettling, but right now he doesn't mind.

"What if it means I'm a psychopath?", Mike whispers.

"Shut up", Eddie says, bumping his knee against Mike's. "Psychopaths don't talk to sheep on their way to the slaughterhouse to make sure they know it's not their fault."

"They also don't worry about being psychopaths", Stan adds.

Maybe they are right, but Mike still feels like something is wrong with him and maybe he's too young to think so, but his friends are the same age and they've all experienced it, so clearly something is off about him.

"There are people who never fall in love", Stan says, looking directly at him now. "And if that never happens for you that's okay, Mike."

“Yeah”, Eddie agrees and both boys hug him. Sandwiched between them Mike finally believes them, because he doubts being in love can be better than being with his friends.

As if they sensed something going on, the other Losers pile out of the door.

“What’s this?”, Bev asked. “Group hug without us?”

“I don’t think so!”, Richie cries and plasters himself to Eddie’s back. Mike’s smile grows a little, maybe he won’t ever fall in love, but he can see it in his friends and it makes him happy for them. Bill, Bev and Ben join in too. Maybe being in love is overrated, because Mike loves them, loves them with all his heart and how can he fear to be left out, when they’re all holding him so tight he might need Eddie’s aspirator? No, this love is real and it’s enough. More than enough.

Author's Note:

This was harder to write than I expected. I'm aro ace myself and coming up with 6 people experiencing love was exhausting. I have a special place in my heart for ace!Mike and I felt he needed some love.

Talk to me on tumblr @itchierichie